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CATHOLIC SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

# Letter<sup>SM</sup>

A publication of  
Catholic School  
Management

**July 2015**

**Volume XXXVI, No. 6**

## **Involving Young Alumni in the Life of the Catholic School**

Catholic schools have done, and continue to do, a remarkable job of preparing students for their life-long faith journeys. In fact, recent research from a CARA 2012 Survey indicates that weekly Mass attendance for members of the Millennial generation reaches 34% for those who attended a Catholic elementary school and 39% for those who attended a Catholic high school, while this number rests at 5% for those who did not attend a Catholic school. Furthermore, standardized test scores prove that a Catholic education cannot be beat. Catholic school students are prepared for the rigors of college and life when they graduate. Despite these well-known successes, an area still in need of continual attention is taking the time and energy to teach students how to be involved alumni.

Active, engaged alumni programs do not flourish by accident. There must be, first and foremost, a clear recognition that any alumni organization serves both alumni and the school. Effective alumni organizations are also the result of careful planning, teaching, regular communication, and implementation of programs designed to involve alumni in all stages of life in the ongoing life of the school. The focus of this article is on young alumni, defined as those who have graduated within the past 15 years.

Young alumni have the time, and the inclination, to stay involved with their alma mater. Most are in college or just starting a career and do not yet have a family. They are looking for opportunities to reconnect and stay connected with friends or to improve their employment outlook.

For some schools, the approach used with young alumni is that they are “hands off” for contact or solicitations during the college years. However, Catholic School Management believes that the young alumni years are the optimal time to start to engage and involve alumni in a lifetime relationship,

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beginning as early as while they are still walking your halls as students. Why wait until they leave to teach them about their role as alumni?

### **Current Student Training**

A yearly classroom visit program for high school students by development office personnel can introduce them to the important role of alumni and encourage them to stay active in the life of the school after they graduate. A sample visit program might include:

- Freshmen – introduce students to the members of the development office and their roles, and define the term “alumni.”
- Sophomores – introduce and explain the role of alumni and the importance of this group to the school and its mission.
- Juniors – introduce the concept of the annual fund and how it impacts the school and its offerings to current students. Initiate a student phase to the annual fund encouraging 100% participation from the junior class while offering a class T-shirt, or similar item, as motivation to give.
- Seniors – emphasize the importance of participation in the annual fund. Explain the role of social media as it pertains to the maintenance of contact with classmates and the school after graduation. Form a committee to begin planning the 5<sup>th</sup> year reunion. Identify class representatives (class agents) charged with maintaining contact with classmates. Educate students about their future responsibilities and opportunities as alumni. Offer a ceremony to welcome them formally as the newest members of the alumni community.

For elementary schools, maintaining contact with alumni is more challenging as many Grade 8 graduates are now heading off to a new high school environment that will undertake such efforts as described above to shine as “the” alma mater. Gather home and email information to maintain contact with graduates. Organize and manage the school’s constituent database to ensure that key

newsletters, annual reports, and other items continue to be sent to young alumni as well as their parents. Regularly request contact information updates from both the alumni themselves, as well as their parents. Send specific information requests at the appropriate time to find out about college decisions, and also to request information on life updates, honors, and awards through the years of high school and college. Many high school students have service hour requirements to complete and involving elementary school alumni for this purpose plants the seed of a lifetime habit of providing some kind of service to the school through gifts of time, talent, or treasure.

Cultivation of young alumni as donors can begin while they are students. Graduates who participate in alumni phonathons for the school annual fund as students are more likely to donate back to the school in the future. Encourage annual giving early by asking graduates to make a small gift to the annual fund. Many schools tie the size of the gift in some way to the year of graduation or the size of the graduating class. Graduates can be involved in deciding how the gift will be used, or another approach used is to establish an endowed Class Scholarship which can be added to annually.

At any level of schooling, it is imperative to train the faculty and staff about the alumni program, why it exists, and how it can help the school in the long run. Let them know that alumni relations is everyone’s job in the school, and they should make an effort to pass along information regarding young alumni to the appropriate person or office.

### **Data and Communication**

With the high mobility of recent graduates, maintaining current demographic data is key to maintaining contact with young alumni. The first few years out of school are a critical time to capture, maintain, and update information including mobile phone numbers, addresses, Twitter account names, Facebook names, and email addresses. The ability for alumni to update their information should be readily available online, via publications, at special events, and through class agents.

Identify opportunities to gather and update alumni data. When alumni request a transcript from the school, is that information automatically forwarded to the development office for updates? When a staff member encounters alumni outside of the school, do they ask if regular contact is received from the school? If the response is negative, then encourage the staff member to collect that data and forward to the appropriate office or individual.

Internet searches and social media sites such as LinkedIn can provide current job titles and accurate contact information for graduates who might not regularly provide updates to the school. An important reason for contacting alumni is so that the school can solicit feedback from young alumni and incorporate these suggestions into alumni programming, as well as ongoing school improvement activities. Brief online surveys sent via email or available on social media are effective means for determining the types of programs that appeal to young alumni, or those they wish had been available to them as students. Informal discussions at on-site events also provide opportunity to gather this kind of information.

### **Social Media**

According to the Pew Research Center study, “Teens, Social Media & Technology Overview 2015,” today’s teens are diversifying their social network site use. A majority of teens (71%) report using more than one social network site. Having a school presence on Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and other social media platforms helps former students interact with you, and you with them. Instead of waiting for the quarterly alumni magazine to be published and delivered, through the use of social media, the school can engage young alumni as often as desired.

Since the majority of young adults depend on social media to maintain relationships with friends including classmates, the challenge is to develop a well-managed school presence on the most popular social media platforms. Sites such as those listed above offer ways for the school to engage, share, connect, network, and interact with their alumni at a

minimal cost. Blogs, YouTube, Pinterest, Instagram, and Google+ are other social media tools being used at the current time in Catholic schools.

### **Special Events**

Keep in mind that young alumni are in college or just starting out in careers. Young alumni may prefer less structured events, and they may attend to meet people of their same age. Generally these events concentrate on social activities where informality is high and cost (to alumni) is low.

Getting input from young alumni will help to keep alumni programs fresh. Their involvement with planning special events will develop their leadership skills and look great on their resumes. Consider hosting some of the following college-age alumni events:

- Plan satellite gatherings on or near local college campuses for college-age alumni.
- Alumni Mass and reception for college-age alumni home on break.
- Open gym over Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter vacations for alumni.
- Invite alumni to pizza party before or after football or basketball games.
- Have a yearbook pick-up date gathering for the most recent graduates.

Consider hosting some of the following for alumni in the workforce:

- After work cocktail parties located off site. Alumni will be more likely to attend the event if it is affordable and takes place after work. Younger alumni prefer less formal and less structured events and may come to reconnect with others. Encourage the exchange of business cards. Provide giveaways.
- Local establishments can be designated as “the place” for regular gatherings that can be informal and social in nature, or more focused such as a “Theology on Tap” series as outlined by RENEW International.
- Business networking breakfasts.



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- Community service projects. Most schools require service hours to graduate. Why not continue to offer this opportunity for alumni?
- 5K fun run, local hikes and nature tours, and other organized outdoor recreational activities.

Word of mouth works. If alumni attend an event and have a great time, they will tell others. Send an email/text reminder and make a social media post a few days before your event to make sure everyone remembers. Young alumni are more likely to attend events if they seem to be fun. Be sure to recap the event using recent photos in newsletters and on your social media channels. Alumni who reconnect with the school through events or activities as described above have now made a connection that can be further enhanced through invitations to participate on the school's board or its committees, to offer insight and participation in strategic planning activities, and to provide ongoing testimonials both online and in print to enhance the image of the school.

### **Boarding School Clients**

Unique opportunities exist for Catholic boarding schools to continue to involve young alumni in the life of the school. Most schools already follow the "best practices" of assigning class agents and including news from young alumni in the quarterly newsletters or news magazines as well as the annual report. Most Catholic boarding schools also provide opportunities for young alumni to participate in the annual fund and report on levels of class participation. Some schools such as Portsmouth Abbey in Portsmouth, Rhode Island clearly designate alumni who have faithfully contributed to the annual fund by including a raven (the school mascot) after their name for each five years of continuous participation.

Note that alumni from the 1990's are now in their 30's or early 40's, and many are married and raising young children. Both the admissions office and development office should be in regular contact with these young alumni to be sure that their alma mater is being considered for high school education. Involving these alumni in regional visits of representatives from the admissions and development offices is key to ensuring that both the alumni and his/her spouse see the Catholic boarding school as a viable option for their children who may now be in grades Pre-K through 5. Regular communication, visits to the areas where these young alumni live, as well as invitations to visit their alma mater when they're in the area, are keys to ensuring the enrollment of "legacies" in the Catholic boarding school.

Alumni generally developed a strong sense of pride during the years at their alma maters, which they will carry with them for the rest of their lives. Therefore, it is all important for schools to start early to build and maintain strong and lasting relationships with their students before they become alumni. Alumni hold the financial future of your school in their hands. Recognizing and planning programs for young alumni are investments in the future. Building institutional loyalty and creating alumni networks will help assure that your "young alumni" stay with you until they become "old alumni"!